

Trump Worked With Fox News on DNC Staffer Story, Suit Claims

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President [Donald Trump](#) collaborated with Fox News to concoct a story claiming a Democratic National Committee staffer was killed in retaliation for leaking Hillary Clinton's emails to Wikileaks, according to a lawsuit by a private investigator for the slain man's family.

Trump, who allegedly reviewed the Fox story before it was published on May 16, intended for the article to divert attention from the widening probe into ties between his campaign and Russia, according to the suit filed Tuesday by Rod Wheeler, the investigator, a former Washington police detective and occasional Fox News contributor.

He claims Fox attributed fabricated quotes attributed to him in the story to back up the network's false thesis. Wheeler said the fake quotes amount to defamation. Fox later retracted the story.

The alleged motive behind the report, overseen by Fox investigative journalist Malia Zimmerman, was "to shift the blame from Russia and help put to bed speculation that President Trump colluded with Russia in an attempt to influence the outcome of the Presidential election," Wheeler said in the complaint filed in Manhattan federal court.

"The retraction of this story is still being investigated internally and we have no evidence that Rod Wheeler was misquoted by Zimmerman," Fox News President Jay Wallace said in a statement. He called the allegations "completely erroneous."

The White House didn't immediately respond to a request for comment on Wheeler's allegations.

Unsolved Crime

Seth Rich was shot to death on July 10, 2016, as he walked home from a Washington bar. Police believe Rich was the victim of a botched robbery attempt, but the crime remains unsolved.

After Clinton claimed that Russian hackers had been the source of the DNC leak, Wikileaks founder Julian Assange deflected the claim in part by pointing out that Rich, a low level staffer, had been murdered weeks earlier, hinting at a DNC conspiracy.

Wheeler's suit names Zimmerman and Fox News contributor Ed Butowsky, a friend to former Press Secretary Sean Spicer and Trump's chief strategist, Steve Bannon. Butowsky allegedly approached Wheeler in February and offered to finance an investigation into Rich's murder for Zimmerman's story, according to the lawsuit.

According to the complaint, it was all just a setup.

"Butowsky and Zimmerman were not simply Good Samaritans attempting to solve a murder," Wheeler said in the suit. They "hoped that, if they could confirm that Seth Rich leaked the DNC emails to WikiLeaks, that would debunk reports the Russians were responsible for the DNC hacks."

The allegedly faked quotes used in the story, attributed to Wheeler, include, "My investigation up to this point shows there was some degree of email exchange between Seth Rich and Wikileaks." Wheeler was also falsely quoted saying the Democratic National Committee or Clinton's team were blocking the murder

investigation.

'Behind the Scenes'

Butowsky allegedly kept Spicer and Bannon apprised of the work on the Rich murder story, as well as the Justice Department's director of public affairs, Sarah Flores. She denied the allegation. "I have not communicated with Mr. Butowsky at any point this year," Flores said in an email.

Butowsky told Wheeler that the bogus quotes were included in the story because "that is the way the President wanted the article," according to the suit. Butowsky couldn't be immediately reached for comment.

The first paragraph of Wheeler's complaint includes a screen shot of a May 14 text message to Wheeler by Butowsky that reads: "Not to add any more pressure but the president just read the article. He wants the article out immediately. It's now all up to you. but don't feel the pressure."

Fox retracted the story on May 23, but not before it inflamed Clinton opponents and fueled conspiracy theories.

The court fight cuts to the heart of one of Trump's regular claims about the media -- that news outlets other than Fox are essentially fake news, especially stories linking his campaign to Russia.

"Fox News was working with the Trump administration to disseminate fake news in order to distract the public from Russia's alleged attempts to influence our Country's presidential election," Douglas Wigdor, a lawyer for Wheeler, said in a statement announcing the lawsuit.

Wheeler, who is black, also claims Fox discriminated against him based on his race by giving him less air time than white colleagues who are more frequently hired into full-time positions. Wigdor represents several current and former Fox staffers who have made similar allegations.

"Fox News vehemently denies the race discrimination claims in the lawsuit -- the dispute between Zimmerman and Rod Wheeler has nothing to do with race," Wallace said in the statement.